

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: *Alchemy and Art*



Shakespeare celebrations in the Washington, DC area this spring provided an excellent opportunity for the White Memorial Chemistry Library at the University of Maryland to highlight the importance of chemistry as a science and make it more interesting to the general public through an exhibit, “Alchemy in Shakespeare’s Time.” Literary works and paintings showed the fascinating history of alchemy, its relation to literature and art, and how it has influenced the development of modern science.

Science historians are beginning to view alchemy as a serious and complex endeavor out of which modern chemistry gradually began to emerge during the 17th century. Although the alchemists’ quest for certain miraculous substances (the Philosopher’s Stone, which converts cheap metals to gold, or the *Elixir Vitae*, which confers holiness and immortality) was more like magic than science, it cannot be denied today that alchemy remained a powerful presence in Europe for centuries and paved the way for modern science. The artists from the 16th and 17th century, when Shakespeare lived, and the English “Greats”—Shakespeare, Milton, Lewis, Herbert, Blake, Donne, and Joyce—all used alchemical concepts to speak to deep spiritual needs and desires. Alchemy was part of the air they breathed, and it found its way into the world of their paintings and their literary works.

The picture on the cover of this issue is a reproduction of a famous painting, *The Alchemist*, by David Ryckaert (1612-1661). The original belongs to Dr. Alfred Bader, founder of the Aldrich Chemical Company (now Sigma-Aldrich), who is a passionate collector of alchemical and other Old Dutch paintings [1]. An article about his life story and an interview with him were published in our previous (Spring) issue of the Bulletin [2] that can be viewed at <http://acscinf.org/docs/publications/Interviews/Bader/2007/>. Dr. Dr. Bader is one of a few famous chemists-collectors of paintings related to alchemy. Carl Djerassi, emeritus professor of chemistry at Stanford who has created “the pill,” is another chemist collector of alchemical paintings. The third famous chemist collecting such paintings was Chester G. Fisher, the founder of the Fisher Scientific Company. A book by Principe and DeWitt is a rich source of information on the relationship between alchemy and art [3].

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Dr. Alfred Bader for allowing us to use his painting, *The Alchemist*, for the cover of this issue.

References:

1. Bader, Alfred (1995) *Adventures of a Chemist Collector*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd: London
2. Baykoucheva, Svetla (2007) Chemistry and Art: The Incredible Life Story of Dr. Alfred Bader. *Chemical Information Bulletin* 59 (1), 11.
3. Principe, Lawrence M. and DeWitt, Lloyd (2002) *Transmutations: Alchemy in Art: Selected Works from the Eddleman and Fisher Collections at the Chemical Heritage Foundation*. Chemical Heritage Foundation: Philadelphia, PA

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